

## Rosa Parks' faith

**O**n a March day in 1955, a young black woman refused to give up her seat for a white person on a city bus in Montgomery, Ala. As she was dragged off by police, she let loose a string of expletives that shocked everybody on the bus that day.

History would not remember Claudette Colvin.

Black pastors in town were looking for someone to challenge the offensive segregation ordinance in Montgomery, but they concluded that this feisty, pregnant and unmarried teenager who was given to profanity was not the role model they needed.

In October it happened again. And again it was a young woman who was forced to give up her seat. But she was from a poverty-stricken,

dysfunctional family, and the pastors again demurred, believing that her circumstances would render it difficult for her to withstand the pressures of a nasty public fight.

The third incident occurred on Thursday, Dec. 1. This time it was someone everyone knew. Historian Taylor Branch described her this way in his book *Parting the Waters*: "A tireless worker and church-goer, of working class station and middle-class demeanor, Rosa Parks was one of those rare people of whom everyone agreed that she gave more than she got. A Methodist herself, she served as teacher and mother figure to the kids of the NCAAP Youth Council, who met at a Lutheran church near her home."

She was the one, the one to challenge the hated segregation law. She agreed to do so despite the pleading of her worldly-wise husband, who was absolutely terrified at the thought of his wife returning to the white man's jail, helpless in the face of the racial fury that lay ahead.

The following Monday, the legal challenge was on, and so was the historic boycott of the segregated buses by black riders. Word was spread through the churches the Sunday before

that no black citizen should be on those buses on Monday, and that everyone should attend a special meeting Monday night at the Holt Street Baptist Church to hear details of the boycott demands and the legal case.

The church was mobbed that night, and the throng heard a new young preacher develop the case for Rosa Parks: "Nobody can doubt the height of her character," intoned 26-year-old Martin Luther King, in his first political sermon. "Nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment."

He went on to paint the struggle ahead in profoundly Christian terms, as quoted by Branch: "...it is not enough for us to talk about love. Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. Justice is love correcting that which would work against love."

That night, Rosa Parks became the symbol of the bus boycott in Montgomery, which would stretch across a year, and King would become the leader of an ever-broadening movement.

Later in life, Rosa Parks would reflect back on the day of her arrest. "Since I have always been a strong believer in God, I knew that He was with me, and only He could get me through the next step."

This spiritual outlook was lost on most reporters then, and it was absent when they wrote the stories of her death in October. But in large measure it was Christ's strength working through her, as well as through the pastors who led the revolt against discrimination, that launched and sustained the civil rights struggle.

Today Rosa Parks is, properly, a venerable figure for all of us who turn to Christ for quiet strength in the battle for moral justice. ●

**THE LADY RIDES:** A woman of vibrant faith, Rosa Parks in 1995 re-enacted her famous Montgomery, Ala., bus ride forty years earlier. Parks died Oct. 24 at the age of 92.